

CHAPTER TEN

Vision Journey:
Riding the Tree of Knowledge

— The Sacred Poetry —

Learning from Freya the secrets of divination was just one of the experiences Odin underwent in his quest for knowledge of Wyrð. In the lines of an ancient poem called *Havamal*, included in the compilation known as the *Elder Edda*, and written in a form so condensed it is practically a hidden code, are clues to his other ventures into mystical consciousness.

The *Havamal* narrates Odin's own description of his initiation, his exploration of his inner worlds, and the map of the cosmos he revealed during his spirit journeys. The concentrated core of Odin's vision quest for shamanic knowledge is distilled in the following lines:

I know that I hung on the windswept tree
for nine full nights,
wounded with a spear and pledged to Odin,
offered, myself to myself;

The wisest know not from whence spring
the roots of that ancient tree.
They did not comfort me with bread,
and not with the drinking horn;

I peered downward,
I grasped the 'runes',
screeching I grasped them;
I fell back from there.

Nine lays of power I learned
from the famous son of Bolthor,
father of Bestla,
and I got a draught of the precious mead,

mixed with magic Odrerir.

Learned I grew then, lore-wise,
waxed and throve well:
Word from word gave words to me,
Deed from deed gave deeds to me.¹

Each of these lines refers to a whole world of symbol and significance, and they need to be opened up, expanded, and explained in order for us to understand the world he is depicting. But the bare outlines are clear, and generally agreed by scholars: in the myth Odin climbed into a sacred tree, and stayed in the tree for nine days and nights with no food and water. Under these conditions of privation and intense focus, he entered states of consciousness in which the tree changed into an enormous white, eight-legged horse, on which Odin rode through the sky and down to the Lowerworld to the nine Otherworlds of Knowledge.

During this journey he met, at a magical spring bubbling up by the root of the World Tree, a wisdom giant called Mimir. Odin's remarkable encounters with Mimir yielded incantations and powers to help him in his quest. He then journeyed to far-off realms where he had to fight, use his wits, trickery, shapeshifting and other powers acquired from Mimir to obtain the source of sacred inspiration which was stored in three vast cauldrons of mead, and hidden in a cave in the centre of a mountain. It was guarded by fearsome giants, and Odin nearly died in the mountain. But triumphantly he fulfilled his quest, and brought back to his fellow gods, and the human inhabitants of Middle Earth, the secrets of life contained in the mead of wisdom. His quest for visions of wisdom formed an archetypal template for mortal shamans to follow in the Wyrð traditions of ancient Europe.

Let us explore the inner meaning of Odin's visions by reference to the lines in *Havamal*, beginning with the tree.

— Yggdrasil —

I know that I hung on the windswept tree . . .
The wisest know not from whence spring
the roots of that ancient tree.

These lines conjure an evocative image of a mysterious tree. Such images lie at the heart of all shamanic visionary activity, and Odin's journey on the World Tree echoes an apparently universal experience of shamans in all cultures, and all times. In recently surviving tribal cultures, apprentice shamans acquire their helping spirits, those 'beings' which advise, give healing powers and assist in journeys to worlds of knowledge, in highly ritualised and sacralised retreats into remote areas of the wilderness.²

In all traditional cultures, there were particular places which were favourable for such first encounters with the spirits, places which existed in the material world but which had extraordinary significance as entry points to another world: literally and metaphorically doorways into the spirit realm.³

The physical nature of that special place depended on the terrain in which the tribal culture lived. It could variously be in the vast lake area of Siberia, the mountains of the East, the desert plains of the western United States, the snow plains of the Sami or the rainforests of South America. For the apprentice shamans of early north-western Europe, it was usually on a hilltop, perhaps on an ancient burial mound left by previous civilisations, and preferably high in a tree selected for the ritual.

In all these locations, the initiate shaman entered an altered state of consciousness and plunged into the imaginal depths of the collective unconscious. This state of mind was far from the mundane, everyday state, more a 'dreaming with open eyes'. Nevertheless, the sacred process was framed within the material world, the physical, for shamanic inspiration is largely the sacralisation of the familiar, not merely escape into some other reality. Seeing the familiar with new eyes is the gift of the shamanic journey. So the shaman climbed a real tree in order to undergo a journey of the imagination as colourful and intense as can be imagined, one which engendered the arrival of spirit forces which would come upon the shaman in the guise of visions, sounds and the material form of animals.⁴

In an example from a recent tribal culture, a Siberian shaman thought of the World Tree as represented by a birch. He explains that in preparation for the initiation ritual, or 'on the way to the ancestral

shaman', the master shamans arrived with him at a tree believed to be possessed of powerful life force. The initiate shaman rested at the foot of the special tree and examined the individual markings placed by various shamans over the years. By carving his name into the tree and vividly calling to mind the names of his shamanic ancestors, the newly initiated shaman shared the sacredness of the tree and acquired additional knowledge.⁵

Odin says that he hung on a 'windswept' tree, which suggests an exposed position on high ground; almost certainly a sacred tree on a sacred mound, either growing naturally, or cut down and re-erected on the mound. At dawn or sunset, on the horizon, trees on high ground look as if the top branches are reaching high into the heavens. The tree represented a ladder to other worlds, other realms, other states, and climbing it physically was a metaphor for his journey from one realm into another.

Many psychological and spiritual traditions have used the tree as a central symbol, and the Swiss psychiatrist C.G. Jung, after studying the tree's symbolism and comparing it to the spontaneous pictures of his patients, proposed that the tree formed an image of psychological individuation, in which the roots represented unconscious material, the trunk conscious realisation, and the crown of the tree the goals of life and personal integration.⁶

Of course, all archetypes, the World Tree included, yield images of a deeper level of reality. They do not 'stand for something', like a logo of a company. Their meaning is within the image itself, encompassing myriad nuances and subtleties that can be apprehended by our imagination but beyond the capacity of the conscious mind to process cognitively.

For the tribal peoples of ancient Europe, all creation arises within and from the image of the World Tree. This belief gives rise to a cosmos with a sacred dimension from every aspect, like light shining through a complex crystal, in which each detail also represents and incorporates the whole so that everything is an image of everything else.⁷

The World Tree in which Odin undertook his vision quest was named in the ancient manuscripts as Yggdrasil. This name is a com-

pound of two words: the stem of 'yggr' is 'ygg-', the 'frightening' or 'awe-inspiring one', a nickname for Odin; 'drasill' is a literary word meaning 'horse'. So the name identifies the tree as the means of Odin's 'ride' to the spirit world, his transportation for the quest.⁸ I surmise that the name Ygg is Odin's identity *before* he undertook his initiation in the World Tree. The name Odin, as I explained earlier, is so close to the root meaning of the word 'shaman' that I suspect that Odin is a title acknowledging his new status. And when he first went to Freya, disguised as Heidr/Gullveig, as she waited outside his hall, she referred to him by the same 'pre-name' of 'terror of the gods': that is, Ygg.

— Sleipnir —

During the course of his nine-day fast on the tree, Odin's image of the tree transformed into that of a horse. In fact, the conception of a tree as a horse for journeys into the spirit world reached into all areas of life. When criminals were hanged, the gallows were also known poetically as a 'horse', upon which its victims 'rode' to their deaths to the Lowerworld where reside the souls of the dead.

The World Tree transformed into a magnificent white, eight-legged flying horse called Sleipnir. This visionary animal carried Odin on a journey around the sacred cosmos to the nine worlds of knowledge. And Sleipnir, being eight-legged, had a leg for each of the worlds, with Odin the rider forming the centre point . . . the ninth world. For nine days and nine nights Odin rode Sleipnir to the Otherworlds.⁹

But although we talk of Odin climbing into the World Tree, the tree transforming into a horse and carrying Odin to the worlds of knowledge, it is also important to reverse this process of imagery. It is just as true to say that the process of Odin and his horse journeying to the spirit worlds created the World Tree. In other words, the World Tree is a construction of the mind and soul, the very threads of Wyrd woven through the imagination.

The eight-footed horse is the principal shamanic beast in many cultures in northern Europe, including the Siberian. Historian of

Religion Mircea Eliade, in his detailed study of shamanism throughout the world, relates the story of a Buryat shamanka from central Asia. She was married to a human husband, but she had for her 'second husband' the ancestral spirit of a shaman. One of her husband's mares gave birth to a foal with eight legs, and he cut off four of them. 'Alas,' cried his wife, 'that was my little horse on which I ride as a shamanka,' and after that she left him and disappeared from among men, becoming the protective spirit of her tribe.¹¹

In ceremony, shamans sometimes would incorporate an effigy of a horse. Buryat shamans, for example, use a horse-headed stick in their ecstatic dances, and in later ritual the eight legs of Sleipnir are mimicked by hobby-horses and steeds with more than four feet which appear in carnivals and processions. Hilda Ellis Davidson also points out that a dead man is carried on a bier in the funeral procession by four bearers; borne along thus, he may be described as riding to the Otherworld, the world of spirits of the dead, on a steed with eight legs. Confirmation of this is found in a funeral dirge recorded among the Gonds in India. It contains reference to Bagri Mare, the horse with eight legs, and it is clear from the song that this means the dead man's bier. One verse of the song runs:

What horse is this?
It is the horse Bagri Mare.
What should we say of its legs?
The horse has eight legs.
What should we say of its heads?
This horse has four heads . . .
Catch the bridle and mount the horse.¹¹

Odin's hanging on the tree of Yggdrasil was metaphorically the first ritual of its kind, but apprentice shamans have been performing this process ever since, all over north-west and western Europe, and far east until it turns into the Asian steppes of Siberia.

The external, material world structure which supports the shamanic visions, such as a remote sacred site or tree, serves as a framework enabling the imagination to be liberated from the mundane, the Middle World, and to roam in the realm of the spirit. The structure of the shaman's imagery follows the structure of the tree, with its roots

and branches in different realms, and then in Odin's case transforms into a horse, an eight-legged beast which can fly through the sky to all the worlds of knowledge.

In our contemporary discourse we would conceive of these worlds as being located in our psyche, perhaps deep in the unconscious. The imaginal structure of the World Tree, and the process of journeying on the tree as it transforms into a magical horse, would be tools and techniques for accessing areas of the unconscious which might otherwise be closed to us except in the most deeply symbolic dreams.

But for the peoples of ancient Europe, the imaginal was a realm not physically bounded by the body, and not conceived of as 'only' an internal event. For them, the significance of the imaginal was that it allowed humans to encompass elements beyond the material world. For our ancestors the everyday, logical, analytical, material world was a tiny microcosm of the magnificent, boundless imaginal world.¹² Shamans were expected to be able to journey, and act, in the latter on behalf of the community.

Today our human-centred, separatist view has brought us great benefits through science and engineering, but it has brought also great disadvantages, not least in our poorly developed sense of self-understanding.

To attempt to pursue the quest for self-understanding from the perspective of 'objective science' will simply compound the problem. We need to understand ourselves once more in relation not only to the organic environment from which we have separated ourselves, but also from the sacred dimension accessed through our imagination. We all need to ride Sleipnir to the Otherworlds of Knowledge.

In some ways, we still can.

— Journeys on the Tree of Life —

The sun dipped behind the mountain peak, and splinters of light shimmered across the grassy plateau on the Rigi Mountain in the Swiss Alps. The small plateau was dominated by a magnificent, heavy-branched beech tree which seemed to force its way into existence from an upraised outcrop of rock in a stupendous show of life force.

Curling around the thick trunk of the beech like a coiled snake was the twisting trunk of a small conifer, and at the base of the trees their exposed roots crawled intertwined across the rock like dragons' claws. It was the ideal site for attuning to the spirit of the World Tree.

The root system of the two trees projected ten feet above the plateau before the entwined trunks began to rise above the rocks. Many marvellous holes, openings, crevices and cracks disappeared into shadowy tunnels beneath the trees. We crawled around and over the roots, each person charged with the task of finding a tunnel which drew them, appealed to them, excited them.

When everyone had found their entry into the World Tree, we spread out over the plateau and there the participants in the Wyrð workshop, practitioners of medicine, psychotherapy, business and government, stretched out on their backs and prepared for a journey. For modern seekers of this Wyrð awareness, there needs first to be an acclimatisation, a stretching of the imaginal muscles to encompass the ambience of the spirit world.

When they had relaxed, attended to their breathing, centred, they turned their concentration to the sounds going on around them. The mountain air crackled and hummed, and as they listened I asked them to form a vivid image in their mind of the entrance to the World Tree they had chosen among the rambling roots of the beech and the conifer.

I began to beat a large drum in a regular and slow rhythm. The drum beat holds vivid images in the mind, moves them in action scenarios, and enhances their intensity. The moment I struck the drum hard three times in quick succession, the vision seekers were each to imagine that they were travelling down the hole, burrowing under and into the tree, and along a tunnel inside the mighty plant heading underground, into the Lowerworld. There they would see and hear spirits.

I hit the drum three times, paused, and then resumed rhythmic drumming at a faster rate. In shamanic cultures around the world, entrances to the Lowerworld commonly lead from the World Tree into a tunnel which eventually opens out upon bright and marvellous Otherworld landscapes. From there the shaman travels wherever he

desires for minutes or hours, finally returning back up the tunnel to emerge at the point where he entered.

Such a journey is described by Rasmussen for the Iglulik Eskimo of Hudson Bay:

For the very greatest (shamans), a way opens right from the house whence they invoke their helping spirits; a road down through the earth, if they are in a tent on shore, or down through the sea, if it is in a snow hut on the sea ice, and by this route the shaman is led down without encountering any obstacle. He almost glides as if falling through a tube so fitted to his body that he can check his progress by pressing against the sides, and need not actually fall down with a rush. This tube is kept open for him by all the souls of his namesakes, until he returns on his way back to earth.¹³

And on *his* journey, Odin's horse Sleipnir 'rode nine days and nine nights down ravines ever darker and deeper, meeting no one, until he came to the banks of the river Gjoll which he followed as far as the Gjoll Bridge; this bridge is roofed with burning gold.' The bridge was the fantastic bridge of fire known as the Rainbow Bridge; it was the transformational gateway to Otherworlds of Knowledge.¹⁴

This group had done journeying work with me before. This time we were creating a more shared framework for the imagery. The drum began to beat a little faster, and as we had prearranged, they walked down a pathway in their individual landscape towards a hut or small house. Carefully they approached the building, reaching for the handle, and swung open the door. Inside the building it was dark. They entered the room and closed the door behind them. And after a while their eyes adjusted to the dark. And there they could see, in the room, their guardian spirit.

They waited long enough to see whether the guardian had anything it wanted to tell them. A message. A hint. A word from the unconscious. Or from the expanded universe of the dream world? Eventually the drum shifted pattern, and speeded up. They were on their way back, through the tunnel, out of the World Tree and back into their bodies.

We sat on the plateau and talked of what they had seen.

Some of the participants had seen animal-like creatures. Some had

encountered human forms. Still others had heard sounds or voices communicating with them, but not seen a manifestation. 'I felt myself to be underwater. As soon as we came out of the tunnel, I was floating, but underwater. My eyes were open. I could see around quite easily. It was very beautiful. Everything was green and glowing.' The person, a German medical practitioner, explained that she had never dived underwater in the sea or a lake, only in a swimming pool. But the vision she saw was like something she had never before experienced.

I floated forwards without effort, past brightly and indescribably beautiful fish and other creatures. I could hear the drum beating, and I knew that soon I should see the cave or dwelling where my guardian spirit should be. But I just kept floating. Finally I decided to just stop there, underwater, and wait to see what happened. I could see colourful plants around me, and so thought I must be near the bottom of whatever water I was in, but I could not see the bottom. I was able to keep quite still, suspended upright in the water. Then a large fish cruised by, silent, with a round, blue eye watching me carefully. It was a wonderful creature. It had a black stripe down its side, and silvery scales which seemed to move and glitter in the half light. It glided past, watching me with its deep, deep eye. And then it told me something, but without speaking. Its thought came into my head as a thought. It was like seeing inside my own life with a bright torch.

Then I heard the drum beating for us to return. The big fish was disappearing, and so I moved back through the water, faster and faster, and was swept back up the tunnel to here.

The woman was obviously very moved by the experience. I asked her how she felt about the large fish. 'I love it,' she said immediately. 'I feel very close to it, and I love it. It was beautiful, and it came so close and looked at me so carefully.'

Others talked of their experiences, though I asked them to be discriminating about what they revealed of messages, lessons, personal insights. Even with such relatively simple preparation, such imaginal journeys can be surprisingly affecting and important. Under such evocative conditions it is common for people to be surprised with what comes up. The nature of the images they see can be thrilling, revealing, shocking, transcendent.

Journeys can be open-ended into Otherworlds, or to specific worlds, selected according to the issues in the individual's life, the psychic and sacred spaces they wish to explore. Ambitious initiatory journeys can be accomplished with the help of fasting, and we talked about Odin's remarkable journey on Sleipnir to the nine worlds of knowledge; the 'original vision quest'. We talked also about how he had prepared for that experience, and meditated on his sacrifice of nine days and nine nights without food or drink. And then to recover from this meditation we went and had a very good and very large meal!

— The Sacred Nine —

For nine full nights . . .
nine lays of power I learned.

A person undergoing a shamanic initiation enters a time out of time, a sacred time set aside for the purpose of attuning to the trajectory between this world and the spirit realm. This altered experience of time transcends the everyday linear progression of minutes, hours, and days. Of course, the two time dimensions exist side by side; while Odin was journeying in sacred time, he was still existing in mundane time. But the experiential realities of the two dimensions, just as in our dreaming and waking states, are very different.

In the Celtic myths a very short time in the Otherworld may correspond with a very long time in this world. Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, scholars of Celtic literature, recount from medieval texts journeys into the spirit world in which a man returns after a seemingly brief sojourn and finds that his contemporaries are dead and that his own name is but a memory. And then when he touches the ground or embraces a now ancient grandson or nephew or tastes the food of mortals, he 'moulders into a little heap of dust as though he had been dead for ages'.¹⁵ On the other hand, a long time in the Otherworld sometimes transpires to have been but an instant in this world. For example one character, Nerta, after three days in the Otherworld, returns to find his companions at the same meal as they

were preparing when he left them. So Otherworld time can be both longer and shorter than the time of our world.

In the lines of the *Havamal*, Odin tells us that in the course of his initiatory ordeal he hung in the World Tree for nine nights. Given that the experience of the initiatory world of 'altered states' can be very different from the linear time we are used to associating with 'nine nights', it is possible that the literal duration of his journey was nine hours, or even (although unlikely!) nine minutes. When I first read of Odin's long ordeal I doubted whether it could literally be true. It seemed that such a long ordeal would end in death, for nine nights without liquid refreshment is in medical opinion very difficult to survive physiologically.

However, I then found out about the remarkable marathon monks of Tibet. These are Buddhist mystics, people who live in the mountains and who are embarked upon a training of many years leading to enlightenment, and recognised status as an initiated monk. Part of their training involves the nightly performance of a marathon: a journey of about thirty miles on foot, usually accompanied at a fast walking pace, wearing sandals and carrying a staff. At various points on the journey the monks stop to perform a simple ritual of meditation, and then they continue their long trek. This nightly marathon walking goes on for several years, during which time the monks suffer physical stress to the ankles and joints of the legs, but of course otherwise build up a phenomenal level of fitness and stamina.

At the end of a prescribed period of marathon walking, usually five years, the mystic is entitled to undergo the ordeal which sanctifies them as monks. It is an ordeal which in some ways parallels that of Odin and the traditions of our ancestors in ancient Europe, for it involves nine nights of privation. The would-be master is given a last meal, and then taken to a hut set aside for the purpose of the ritual. There he sits and meditates during the day. At evening, he is escorted from the hut by other monks, observers, and people from the community, along a path to a stream, where he fills two pails of water, sets them on either end of a pole, and carries them with the pole across his shoulders back to his meditation hut. He is then enjoined by the ritual to drink none of this water. Instead, as he prays, and meditates, he

gradually pours away the liquid as a sacrificial offering; an offering which becomes more and more of a sacrifice as the nights progress and the monk becomes ever more thirsty.

Each evening, he is escorted again to the stream to fill the pails of water, and back to the hut. On the first night of the ordeal, it takes perhaps two minutes for him to make the journey from the hut to the stream and back. On the fourth night, when the deprivation was considerable, it might take about thirty minutes. On the last, ninth night, it is an eternity: at least an hour of shuffled progress, in a greatly weakened, dehydrated and shrunk state, to make the journey, with the weight of the pole on his shoulders supported by helpers.

At the end of the initiatory period, the monk is the centre of a large celebratory and sacred feast, in which he is offered his first refreshment for nine days and nights: a bowl of tea. He takes a small sip, and the period of meditation comes to a conclusion. Two months after this remarkable ordeal the monks are back on their arduous ritual of nightly marathon walks for a further year or more until they have completed their task.

This ritual impressed me not only because of the awesome willpower and dedication of the monks, but also because the privation lasted for nine nights in literal time (it may have felt like nine years in phenomenological time!). So it may be the case after all that Odin's claim to have spent nine nights in his initiatory ritual may be a measure of 'mundane', everyday time, rather than being a symbolic or experiential calibration which differs in some way from this duration.

The number nine was held to be sacred not only by the people of the ancient European culture of Wyrð, and in contemporary Tibet, but also in recently surviving 'traditional' cultures all over the world. Shamanic rituals refer to nine heavens, nine gods, nine branches of the cosmic tree, and so on. Eliade describes, for example, how the Altaic shaman climbs a tree or post with nine notches, representing the nine celestial regions. And when people of the traditional Yakut culture make blood sacrifices, their shamans set up a tree with nine notches outdoors and climb it to carry the offering to the celestial god Ai Toyon. The initiation of shamans among the Siberian Sibos includes a small tree notched with nine steps. This highly significant number

nine often delineates the levels, realms or obstacles that have to be negotiated and overcome when the shaman ascends to the sky in search of spirit powers.¹⁶

For our ancestors, the symbolic importance of the number nine was shared among many tribal groups. The Celtic parallel to the Anglo-Saxon, Germanic and Scandinavian shamanic archetype of Odin/Wotan/Woden is the god Lug who is, in Welsh mythology, wounded by a spear and hangs on a tree like Odin. The 'nine full nights' that Odin hangs in the World Tree are reflected by the fact that Lug's tree had sustained 'nine score fiercenesses'.¹⁷

It is remarkable the extent to which the number nine features generally in ancient Celtic ritual and symbolic tradition. Rees and Rees give instances of where it is stated, for example in the ancient Welsh laws, that the serf class should build nine houses for the king, while the serf's own house should also consist of a hall plus eight rooms.¹⁸ Repeated allusions to houses comprising 'nine houses (or rooms) in one' in the fifteenth-century poems of Guto'r Glyn confirm the existence of a continuing Welsh tradition that a complete house should consist of nine component parts. Nine was thought to symbolise the whole, something complete. In Welsh medieval society the ninth generation was the recognised limit of kin relationship, and even the human body was thought of as comprising nine principal parts.

The number also appears in traditional British games such as Ninepins, in which the middle pin is called the 'king', and Nine Men's Morris, which was played on a square divided into eight sections around a central 'pound'. In Scotland the need-fire, built at ritual occasions, was kindled sometimes by nine men and sometimes by nine nines of 'first-begotten' sons. The number was also connected with the Beltaine fire in Scotland, and in Wales, as in parts of Scandinavia: the fire was made with nine sticks collected by nine men from nine different trees. Nines, and particularly the 'ninth', were very important in divinations and in folk cures. So in Welsh tradition the symbolism of 'nine' extended far beyond the special rituals of the shamans, and assumed a guiding importance in the structure of buildings, games, kin relationships and so on.

In ancient Irish literature 'companies of nine' feature prominently,

often as a leader and eight others. Rees and Rees illustrate this by reference to descriptions of mythological kings, queens and heroes, including Medb's mode of travel in the story *Tain Bo Cuailnge*: 'and nine chariots with her alone; two of these chariots before her, and two behind, and two chariots at either side, and her own chariot in the middle between them'. King Loegaire, when setting out to arrest St Patrick, ordered nine chariots to be joined together, 'according to the tradition of the gods'. Eight swordsmen guarded Bricriu on his way to the feast he had prepared in his nine-chambered hall. Cu Chulainn had nine weapons of each kind, eight small ones and one large one. These examples concern the exploits of warriors and heroes, and lie at the centre of much of social custom and belief, as well as the cosmology practised and experienced by the shaman.

Of more direct significance in connection with Odin's nine nights on the World Tree is the calendar of the ancient Celtic peoples. In the Welsh laws the ninth day of the month often marks the end of the beginning of a period, and a period of nine days or nine nights figures in the literature as a significant unit of time. In Wales the period of bright moonlight during the harvest moon is called 'the nine light nights', and in Irish the terms 'nomad' and 'noinden' stand for units of nine time-spaces (either days or half days).

So in many ways the conceptual world of the Wyrd people was broken up into units of nine, sometimes with eight 'followers' and a leader, sometimes into nine equal parts.

Why nine? In the thinking of the people of early Europe, the connections, the doorways, the passages of contact between the inside and outside worlds, between body and world, are of primary importance. Today we more readily focus our attention on the dividing point between ourselves and the other. The skin is seen as a boundary, usually clothed and thus disguised, and we exist as separate entities, with an interior life largely divorced from those around us. We are truly alone, is the oft-staged assumption.

The body has nine major orifices or sense organs, which represent 'gateways' from the world of the interior to the outside world, connections between the organism and the external world of which it is a part: two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, one mouth, one anus and one

sexual organ. For the people of Wyrd, these connecting points confirmed the integrity of the world of which they were a part. For them the body was a microcosm of the whole, and the bodily connecting points with the external were symbolic of the gateways to knowledge.¹⁹ For these reasons, Odin's nine nights on the initiatory journey was not an arbitrary period of time. It reflected, rather, a deep-seated understanding of the significance of the connection between people, the environment, and the worlds of knowledge.

In contemporary culture, we pay little attention to the significance of numbers. In everyday parlance, we refer to the scoring of a century in cricket, or that someone who has accumulated a lot of money may be a 'millionaire'; these sort of numbers carry a symbolic significance somewhat beyond their relevance as a unit of counting. After all, 99 runs or 101 runs are very little different from the century in cricket, but are not remarked on in the same way. And 999,000 dollars is a lot of money, almost a millionaire, but does not bring into play the slightly 'numinous' quality of reaching that 'magical' target.

But perhaps more important than our ignorance of symbolic numbers per se is the element of meaning which lies behind the numbers, which also is missing and leaves a large hole in our cosmology. For we do not think any longer of the human body as having the gift of 'doorways' to the outer world, nor do we use such metaphors for connection with the environment, with 'other'. Instead we regard the body as a machine, which of course is an incestuous metaphor, for we are defining ourselves once again in terms of structures which we have built ourselves, rather than by recourse to naturally occurring phenomena. We lack any 'independent enquiry' into our nature.

If we are not to reinstate symbolic numbers, we nevertheless need to look urgently at reinstating concepts of enjoinderment which the numbers represented for the early European tribespeople. The nine days and nine nights of Odin's sacrifice and meditational ritual represent in themselves knowledge we once had, but have long forgotten.

— Seeing Other Worlds —

In recent shamanic cultures, for people engaged in a vision quest, the

ordinary, physical landscape transformed, as the mind-state changed, into a spirit landscape; a world of dreams in which it was possible to see things manifested which are invisible, unnoticed, brushed aside, and which simply do not exist in the experience of everyday consciousness. The visions which enrich these quests, and which are their primary aim, are sometimes of familiar features, say animals, which exist materially but which take on special and powerful significance in the mind's eye of the observer. Or they may be instead the appearance of creatures formed of the stuff of another world, spun into shape by the imagination, and manifested as convincingly as do objects in the everyday reality, which we support through the process of consensual validation.²⁰

Odin's visions created, represented, illustrated, reflected the structure of the cosmos. He was not there at the beginning of creation, but rather discovered and articulated the structure of 'everything' as a result of the visions he achieved in his shamanic journeying. It is possible that this structure is a universal human one; that we are designed to be able to apprehend reality in a particular way, through certain dimensions and in specified forms, and that Odin articulated this. It is also possible that Odin was attuning to something that is outside human consciousness, and was 'seeing' a structure which has a reality in the language of the spirits. However one positions oneself on this dimension, the images Odin describes were to be at the root of much of Wyrð cosmology.

During his quest for visionary experience, Odin saw the cosmos as shaped like a vast tree, which encompassed all levels of existence. Connected and emanating from this vision is a complex and vivid system of worlds, realms, levels, each of which symbolically represents a particular kind of knowledge, power and dimension in the spiritual world.

The tree appeared in Odin's vision as a giant ash tree called Yggdrasil, so vast, says Sturluson, that 'its branches spread out over the whole world and reach up over heaven'.²¹ This massive construction served as the axis of the cosmos, and everything else was constructed around it. Featured around the tree was the universe, visualised as a tricentric structure, like three gigantic discs set one

above the other with a space in between each.²² This is a vision which shamanic cultures all over the world have seen in the accounts from the intervening centuries. The top disc is usually called the Upperworld, the middle one is called Middle Earth or Middle World, and the bottom is the Lowerworld. Structured among these three realms were nine worlds: nine places or domains of knowledge, each with a particular ambience and energy. They were conceived of by the people of ancient Europe as locations, spaces, positions in a cosmic firmament.

There were various versions of this cosmic 'map', but the most developed was that of the northern Europeans as illustrated in the *Sagas*. This was an elaborated and literary expression of the ancient cosmology, and may be more developed than some earlier versions. But the parallels between the visions of manifold tribes are strong enough to render the Scandinavian descriptions of the cosmos appropriate as an extended, idealised model for that of the rest of ancient northwestern Europe.²³

On the top level, in the Upperworld branches of the World Tree, was an image landscape in which lived gods and goddesses, represented in human form and subject to the powerful forces of Wyrð. These gods manifested human nature writ large in the cosmos. Their exploits represented the basic needs, desires, fears and achievements of humankind. The god belonged to two tribes, mirroring a distinctive feature of life on the human plane.

There was a tribe of gods known as the Aesir, living in great halls; they were warrior gods representing aspects of the old sky god called Allfather, who was eventually replaced by Odin. His powers, feats and foibles are manifested in the stories of the other gods surrounding him. Also in the Upperworld were the fertility gods known as the Vanir. Finally the Upperworld featured a third world of knowledge, the land of the light elves, magical, and unhumanlike creatures, who feature as enigmatic causes of illness.²⁴

The second level, around the lower branches and trunk of the World Tree, contained further worlds. This realm was called Middle Earth. It is in this realm that human life unfolded. However, Middle Earth does not refer to the material world of everyday existence;

rather it is the spiritual world of humankind. It was surrounded by a vast ocean, and Jormungand, the terrifying world serpent, lay in this ocean; he was so long that he encircled Middle Earth and bit on his own tail. He 'bound', encircled, contained the energy of the realm; without him it would explode in a raging chaos.

Another world lay in this second level, at the outer edge of the disc 'over the ocean', called Jotunheim (home of the giants). The giants were the beings who established the Earth; huge elemental forces lie still at the centre of all earthly activity. They are brutishly strong but short on intellect. They are beginnings, not intellectual developments. The world of the giants is a realm in constant motion, seeking to oppose and give resistance to whatever it meets. It comprises a force of dissolution, the reactive power of destruction necessary to evolutionary change.

Also in this middle realm, in the north, lived the dwarfs. They dwelled underground in a world called Nidavellir (Dark Home), a 'subterranean' world of darkness where shapes are forged. And another world was called Svartalfheim (Land of the Dark Elves). No clear distinction, though, can be drawn between the dwarfs and dark elves; they appear to have been interchangeable.

The Upperworld and the Middle World were connected by a bridge of fire, a flaming rainbow bridge, called Bifrost (Trembling Way). This can sometimes be glimpsed from within everyday states of consciousness. Snorri Sturluson says: 'You will have seen it but maybe you call it the rainbow. It has three colours and is very strong, and made with more skill and cunning than other structures.'²⁵ The Trembling Way bridge transports the shaman from the world of mundane reality to the Otherworld, the transcended states of consciousness.

In the roots of the tree lay another realm, the Underworld or Lowerworld comprising Niflheim, the world of the dead, located nine days northwards and downwards from Middle Earth. Niflheim was a place of bitter cold and unending nights; its citadel was Hel, a place with towering walls and forbidding gates presided over by the hideous female monster, half white and half black, of the same name. However, the Lowerworld in ancient European cosmology is a realm which has to be completely re-visioned in order for us to understand

its significance, for the word 'hel' carries negative connotations for Western culture of the Christian hell.

Certainly the Lowerworld of the European shaman was dark and potent. But this forbidding-sounding world was also the realm of knowledge and the wisdom of the dead. To journey to the Lowerworld was a great feat for shamans, full of danger but with great rewards in spiritual terms.

These three realms and nine worlds were arranged around Yggdrasil like a wondrously decorated Christmas tree; a sacred firmament. Yggdrasil had three mighty roots, one each for the three realms of Upperworld, Middle Earth and Lowerworld. One reached into Asgard, and nourishing this root was the Well of Wyrd, by the side of which lived the three Wyrd Sisters, makers of destiny. Each day the gods gathered here in council. The Wyrd Sisters (Norns in the Scandinavian versions) nurture the great tree. Snorri Sturluson writes: 'It is said further that the Norns who live near the spring of Urd draw water from the spring every day, and along with it the clay that lies around about the spring, and they besprinkle the ash so that its branches shall not wither or decay.'²⁶

The second root spread to Jotenheim, and under this root was the Spring of Mimir, the great, wise giant who, as we shall see, played a central part in the shamanic initiation of Odin as his mentor and challenger. The waters of Mimir's well gave wisdom, and Odin sacrificed one eye to drink from it.

The third root plunged into the Lowerworld; under this root was the Spring of Hvergelmir, the source of eleven rivers and the lair of the dragon Nidhogg. The dragon, or serpent, Nidhogg sends challenges and riddles up the full length of the trunk of Yggdrasil, carried by a squirrel, to a great eagle whose claws grasp the highest branches.

This, then, is the wondrous vision that Odin experienced during his initiation; he saw it, and he created it. It was the 'sacred geography' of his spiritual journey.